

Robbery of an Elderly Woman

Two boys (aged 14 and 15) robbed an elderly woman's handbag and knocked her over causing shock, distress and injury

The Offence

The offence happened while the victim (Florence Smith) was returning from the shops. She was robbed and knocked to the ground by two boys. Her bag was taken but recovered soon after. She received painful bruising to her legs and a blow to her head as she fell, and was understandably very shocked and shaken. The offence left Florence fearful for her safety, and a local neighbour (Nicola Jones) who witnessed the entire incident took care of her. The two offenders were arrested soon afterwards. Ian and Brian were 15 and 14 years of age respectively, both attending the local school, from which they often truanted together. Both had special educational needs. Ian had never been in trouble with the law before and Brian had previously received a Final Warning for some minor offences. The robbery was not planned in advance – its purpose was to gain some money to pay off debts incurred for buying soft drugs. They intended no harm to Florence and had not meant her to fall during the bag snatch. Brian pleaded guilty immediately, and the case was heard at Crown Court because of its seriousness. He was given a 12 month custodial sentence (Detention and Training Order). Ian, however, pleaded not guilty and had to attend an identity parade, where he was identified by Florence's neighbour, Nicola. At this point he changed his plea to guilty, and when sentenced (later than Brian) received the same sentence as Brian – a 12 month DTO. Ian (but not Brian) had been referred to the Family Group Meetings (FGM) project immediately prior to his appearance in Crown Court. He had been assessed as suitable, but it was not known at that stage whether the victim would be interested. However, while in custody, Ian was in too much of a state to discuss the matter any further. In cases where offenders receive a sentence of one year or more for a violent or sexual offence, a Victim Contact Worker from the Probation Service contacts all victims. On a second visit an FGM facilitator accompanied her. Florence said she had a number of specific questions that she wished to ask both young men and she particularly wanted them to know the impact of the offence on her. She wanted to attend a face-to-face meeting with one of the two young men, with Nicola Jones (her carer and witness) as her supporter. The FGM project facilitators had been disappointed that Ian's case could not be dealt with in the community, especially as the

victim wanted some contact with the offenders. They were also disappointed that Brian had not been referred. However, despite this, they were able to take forward preparations for Family Group Meetings when the offenders were released.

Family Group Meeting with Brian

When Brian was due for release, another FGM facilitator went to see him. He was willing to attend a Family Group Meeting and preparations were made for this to take place as soon as he was released. The meeting was held in a local community centre; Florence and Nicola attended as _____ did _____ Brian, _____ his mother and a worker from the Youth Offending Team. Florence was able to say very clearly and forcefully how she had been affected both physically and emotionally. Nicola was also able to say what effect the offence had upon her. This was very difficult for Brian and his mother to hear, and many tears were shed. By the end of the meeting a plan was agreed to support Brian to avoid any further offences and a genuine apology was offered and accepted.

Family Group Meeting with Ian

Ian, having initially pleaded not guilty, had been sentenced some months later than David. His sentence was the same length as Brian's and he was released under supervision after half of the sentence. When Brian was due for release, another FGM facilitator went to see him. On a final visit as part of his pre-release preparation the FGM was finalised and included as part of his Training _____ Plan. Florence and Nicola didn't attend this meeting, but their opinions were voiced via a Victim Impact Statement. Ian opened the meeting by producing a letter of apology that he had written to Florence. Ian was thanked for this, but it was explained that part of the purpose of the meeting was to enable him to understand more fully the effects of the offence on the victims, and it would be more appropriate to offer an apology after having gained that understanding. The meeting reminded them that Florence and Nicola had both suffered as a consequence of Ian's actions. Nicola was especially concerned that Ian's initial denial had put her through the trauma of an identity parade and she was angry about that. Ian explained that he was so ashamed of what he had done that he could not tell his family and so denied it at first. He was very sorry to have put Nicola through the ordeal of attending the identity parade. A Family Plan was made around supervision and support, the input from the Youth Offending Team, frequency of contact and the resumption of formal education/training. It was agreed that the first session would be for Ian to rewrite the letter of apology in the light of what he had heard. This took

place the following week. By the end of the session Ian had turned a cursory two-paragraph letter, focusing primarily on his own experience, into an individual letter to Florence and another to Nicola, addressing the specific issues and questions they had raised. The letters were taken in person by the FGM facilitator and the Victim Contact Worker to Florence and Nicola.

Letters of Apology

Dear Mrs.Smith

I had a family meeting last week. The statement you made was read out, the statement was hard to listen to for me and my parents. Made me think how badly you was affected, I understand physically you had banged your head, forgetting things, bad legs, lost weight and affected sleep. And emotionally scared of young people and maybe another attack, and maybe feeling isolated from society and lonely. I am very sorry what happened that day and regret it deeply, Me myself has never been in any form of trouble myself apart from that time and never again. In the family meeting we discussed my future, I want to go into computers and stay out of trouble, I have started a course already. I don't understand why we did it but I do try and it will never happen again and I am sure of that. The action we took was so wrong and it will be in my head for the rest of my life. Hope you can go back to your old routine, and feel safe again. I will write to your friend and explain my apologies.

Sorry Ian.

Dear Mrs Jones,

I was in a family meeting last week when Mrs Smith's statement was read out it, was hard to hear because of all the problems she's had. I have written a letter to Mrs Smith, it must be hard for you to see your friend not happy. I am sorry you had to go to the I.D parade and that I would not admit to the offence. I didn't admit to it because I was scared. I knew I could of got into a lot of trouble and I would say I did in the end. Also scared of what my parents would think of me. I've never been in trouble before and I was confused and scared. Sorry for putting you through that. I have made a plan for the future, which is hoping to go into computers, I have started a course now. Once again I am very sorry.

Sorry Ian

Ian's Comment About the Process

Later Ian talked about how he had found the process. “It was helpful; at first I didn’t want anything to do with it, I ‘d done my punishment.” “When I heard the impact of the offence on the lady I decided that I could never do anything like that again.” “The process was made easy for me by giving me choices that I could make.” When asked if he would recommend the process to others, he said: “If you feel guilty, then do it, it will really sort your head out, it really helps to say you’re sorry.”